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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ETRD](#) [PTER](#) [CU](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#) [KN](#) [SU](#) [SY](#) [VM](#) [DPRK](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S "TRADITIONAL FRIENDS"

REFS: A. 01 Hanoi 2817 B. 02 Hanoi 716

[C](#). 02 Hanoi 1181 D. 02 Hanoi 589

[E](#). 01 Hanoi 3098

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Vietnam has strived to maintain good ties with a number of the world's most troubling states, including Cuba, Iraq, North Korea (DPRK), Iran, Libya, Sudan, and Syria. With the exception of Sudan and Syria, all have embassies in Hanoi. These relations are largely an outgrowth of the material, financial, political, and moral support given to Vietnam during the War years. Apart from trade with Iraq, most of the countries offer little, if any, value economically to Vietnam. Politically, these countries also contribute little as Vietnam continues its push toward the mainstream of the international diplomatic community. The state media and GVN officials nonetheless continue a drumbeat of support and undertake regular high-level official visits with most of these diplomatic partners. END SUMMARY.

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FRIENDS WITH ALL  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) In accordance with a policy adopted in 1991 at the Seventh Party Congress, Vietnam has moved steadily to conduct a foreign policy that has at its core the goal of establishing and maintaining good diplomatic and economic relations with every nation. In summing up 2002, Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien reaffirmed that "Vietnam is prepared to be a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community." In perhaps one of the more interesting examples of this track, Vietnam maintains cordial diplomatic relations with Israel (which maintains a small embassy in Hanoi) while showing great sympathy and respect towards Yasser Arafat (who has visited Vietnam many times) and the Palestine Authority, whose ambassador is the dean of the Hanoi diplomatic corps and has served here nearly 20 years (ref A).

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USG CONCERNS DO NOT IMPACT GVN FOREIGN POLICY  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) According to Doan Ngoc Boi, Deputy Director General of the MFA's West Asia and Africa Department (the MFA section that covers most of the Middle Eastern countries of concern), the MFA leadership understands the USG's views about what are variously called "states of concern" and "rogue states," but the MFA is charged with carrying out the GVN's policy of maintaining good diplomatic relations "with as many countries as possible." Vietnam is "generally sympathetic" to the US-led war on terrorism, but "this does not affect our relations with traditional friends -- these days, we have no enemies," he added.

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CUBA - "BROTHERLY" RELATIONSHIP  
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[1](#)4. (SBU) Cuba and Vietnam have a close and long-standing relationship and claim to share a kindred revolutionary spirit. Exemplifying Cuba's importance to Vietnam, Prime Minister Pham Van Khai visited in October 2002. In 2001, Foreign Minister Nien and then-Vice President Binh also visited. Cuban President Castro has come to Vietnam twice, in 1973 and 1995, and other high-level visits have occurred at a regular pace. Tran Thanh Huan, senior expert in the MFA's Latin America section, predicted that Communist Party of Vietnam General Secretary Nong Duc Manh might visit Cuba during 2003. In addition, Vietnam expects a reciprocal visit from Cuba's foreign minister. However, no dates have been set for either visit, he added.

[1](#)5. (SBU) In a briefing to the diplomatic community following the Prime Minister's visit, MFA Assistant Foreign Minister (AFM) Nguyen Duc Hung described the Cuba - Vietnam relationship as "traditional, long-standing, and brotherly." In addition, AFM Hung said that the two countries "continue to look for ways to help each other." AFM Hung explained that Cuba has assisted Vietnam in the areas of medicine, medical training, and Spanish language programs. During the Prime Minister's visit, Vietnam agreed to sell additional

rice to Cuba, AFM Hung noted. In 2002, Vietnam exported 125,000 tons of rice to Cuba; the total volume for 2003 is expected to rise to 150,000 tons, according to a press report. Another press report claimed that the rice will be sold on "easy payment terms." AFM Hung confirmed to poloff on the margins of the briefing that Cuba would pay for the rice with "hard currency."

16. (SBU) The MFA's Huan separately noted that the GVN is "paying more attention to developing the bilateral economic potential." In addition to rice, Huan said Vietnam would like to export tea, footwear, and textiles to Cuba. Vietnam "will never forget" the help Cuba provided during Vietnam's "revolutionary struggle," including hospitals, roads, and other materiel support. Two-way trade, however, remains modest, at about USD 50 million per year. Huan predicted that if the USG were to lift the sanctions on Cuba, trade would improve "substantially." He said that Vietnam is "totally against" sanctions and that "only the U.S." views Cuba as a "rogue state." There is no evidence that Cuba possesses or is attempting to acquire nuclear or chemical weapons, Huan added. The head of the Vietnam-Cuba Friendship Association on January 29 said that Vietnam "strongly condemns the US outdated embargo against Cuba and demands an immediate end."

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IRAQ: OLD FRIEND, STRONG ECONOMIC TIES  
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17. (SBU) Unique in its relations with the various countries of concern, Vietnam has a significant trade relationship with Iraq. The MFA's Boi said that in 2001 two-way trade was about USD 750 million. While final figures for 2002 have not yet been compiled, he added that two-way trade may have reached USD one billion. Boi reiterated that all two-way trade activity is "within the UN framework." He admitted that Vietnam still owes Iraq about USD 100 million from the Vietnam War-era. He said that Vietnam would like to increase humanitarian aid as a way to pay the debt, but is hampered by the UN resolutions. According to an Egyptian emboff, the "strong relations" between the two countries make it "unlikely" Iraq would ever attempt to collect on this debt. The Egyptian emboff added that Saddam Hussein felt a "special warmth" toward Vietnam since Vietnamese doctors helped his son recover from a near fatal automobile accident several years ago.

18. (SBU) While the GVN "agrees" that Iraq should carry out the appropriate UN resolutions, Boi reiterated that the GVN opposes any military action against Iraq and "fully supports" the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Iraq. In addition, the GVN has stated "on many occasions" that internal issues "should be decided only by the Iraqi people." A US attack on Iraq "would also not be helpful" to the US-Vietnam relationship, he predicted.

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DPRK: RELATIONS ON THE UPSWING  
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19. (SBU) Vietnam's relations with the DPRK have seen several ups and downs in recent years. Pham Tien Van, Deputy Director for MFA's Asia I bureau, noted that Vietnam and the DPRK have "traditional ties" dating back to the 1950s. Van described the bilateral relationship as "excellent" from that era through the Vietnam War. He added that Vietnam remained "very grateful" for the moral and materiel support the DPRK had provided. In the years following the war, relations were strained, according to Van, because of Vietnam's actions in Cambodia. At the time, the DPRK sided with the PRC in opposing Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Relations took a further nosedive in 1992 when Vietnam, as part of its policy of reaching out to the world community, established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK). Ngo Xuan Binh, Director for the Center for Korean Studies, noted that the DPRK subsequently had made some "tentative overtures" to some western countries and had "slowly become a little less isolated." In that respect, Binh opined that perhaps the DPRK had been influenced by Vietnam's own expanding foreign policy.

110. (SBU) Illustrating the bilateral relationship's upward trend, recent activity has included: (1) the reconvening of the Joint Economic Committee in October 1991 for the first time since Vietnam established diplomatic relations with the ROK in 1992; (2) a visit by GVN President Tran Duc Luong in May 2002 (ref C); and (3) other bilateral exchanges, such as the visit to Vietnam by the Chairman of the DPRK National Assembly in 2001 and the visit to the DPRK in October 2002 by General Le Van Dung, Director of the General Political Department of the People's Army of Vietnam. Binh emphasized that "Vietnam's relations with the DPRK are strong and should continue to improve."

111. (SBU) The Korean Studies Center's Binh separately

opined that the recent increase in bilateral activity stemmed from DPRK recognition of the success Vietnam had achieved with its market reforms. Binh admitted, however, that "it is very hard to know what they think." Binh also lamented that the DPRK's economy is in "such bad shape that it has little, if anything to offer" in terms of trade. Thus, the potential for two-way trade, currently at a "very low level" is "not good," even under barter arrangements, he predicted. The MFA's Van said that Vietnam would continue to assist the DPRK, noting that in 2002, Vietnam had donated 5,000 tons of rice. Van added that, given the DPRK's dire financial situation, it was "unlikely" that Vietnam would collect on the USD 10 million debt the DPRK owed Vietnam from a 1996 rice "sale."

12. (SBU) Van noted that "more stability" on the Korean Peninsula would also have a positive impact on Vietnam's relations with both the DPRK and the ROK. He added that Vietnam wanted to see the region "nuclear-free." A January 10 statement by the MFA further stated that Vietnam hoped all parties would "exercise restraint" and engage in dialogue that will result in "peace, stability, and a nuclear-free status." Van admitted, however, that Vietnam was not "well placed" for an active mediation role in the Korean Peninsula, while admitting that, during his visit to the DPRK, President Luong had passed a message to his hosts from the ROK leadership.

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IRAN: TRADITIONAL FRIENDSHIP  
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13. (SBU) From Vietnam's perspective, Iran remains one of its trusted and traditional friends. The MFA's Boi described the bilateral political relationship as "excellent," noting that "we have many common views and interests, including a peaceful solution to the Iraq crisis." Boi added that Iran had even made overtures about becoming a "dialogue partner" with ASEAN (ref E).

14. (SBU) In 1995, Vietnam's president visited Iran, while in 1996 Iran's president visited Vietnam. Nong Duc Manh, then-chairman of the National Assembly and now General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, visited Iran in

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1999. More recently, President Luong visited in October 2002 and, with his hosts, signed several agreements on economic, technical, and cultural cooperation. President Luong invited the Iranian president to make a return visit, but Boi declined to predict when such a visit will take place.

15. (SBU) Economic activity lags behind the political relationship. Boi lamented that, despite "great economic potential," two-way trade is running at only about USD 40 million. Boi suggested that the main factors inhibiting a stronger economic relationship are: (1) Iran has established stronger links with other countries that export products similar to Vietnam (e.g. rice and textiles); and (2) Iranian and Vietnamese businessmen "do not understand" each other well. Boi opined that a deterioration in the Iraq situation could have a positive impact on the Vietnam - Iran economic relationship, because if Vietnamese businessmen "lose" the Iraq market, they will make stronger efforts to penetrate the Iran market.

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LIBYA: FRIENDLY, BUT NOT QUITE TRADITIONAL  
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16. (SBU) The MFA's Boi described relations with Libya as "good to normal." While the two countries have diplomatic missions in each other's capitals, there is "not much" bilateral activity. Boi said that Vietnam is "grateful" to Libya for the political and economic support provided during the Vietnam War and that the two countries share a "revolutionary background." Boi added that Vietnam also watches carefully over the welfare of approximately 3,000 Vietnamese contract workers in Libya employed by a Korean company for a large irrigation project. Two-way trade is "under USD 10 million" and unlikely to increase more than incrementally in the foreseeable future, Boi predicted. Factors inhibiting the development of increased economic relations, according to Boi, include: (1) a small market; (2) strong competition from the PRC; (3) distance; and (4) a harsh climate.

17. (SBU) A December 2002 visit by a Libyan parliamentary delegation received significant coverage in Vietnam's state-controlled media. Foreign Minister Nien told his Libyan guests that their visit "demonstrated Libya's desire to strengthen ties with Vietnam." Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan urged both countries to work hard so that economic ties could "reach their potential," according to a press report. Boi noted, however, that no other major visits are

planned over the next year.

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SUDAN AND SYRIA: MOSTLY BELOW THE GVN'S RADAR SCREEN  
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18 (SBU) According to the MFA's Boi, the offshore ambassadors of Sudan and Syria (in Jakarta and Beijing, respectively) have only ever visited Hanoi to present their credentials. An Egyptian emboff said that the Sudanese ambassador had expressed little interest in advancing Vietnam - Sudan relations during his December 2002 visit. Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh visited Sudan in 2001, during a trip that also included Tanzania and Angola. Two-way trade between the two countries is "maybe USD one million," Boi estimated. Boi added that the one area for potential cooperation is in agriculture. Vietnam plans to send agricultural experts to Sudan to help improve rice-growing techniques in 2003. Boi commented that Vietnam was "grateful" to Sudan for the "political and moral" support during the Vietnam War. While the relationship is "not especially close," Vietnam also sees Sudan as an important part of its strategy to strengthen overall relations with Africa.

19. (SBU) Tran Viet Tu, MFA Asia II expert, called Vietnam's bilateral relationship with Syria "truly quiet." Tu said that, while Syria had supported Vietnam during the war years, the relationship had not significantly "moved forward from there." Tu said that in an effort to move the relationship forward, then-GVN President Le Duc Anh visited Syria in 1995, but there has never been a reciprocal visit. Tu added that no visits are planned for 2003. Tu suggested that Syria had been "very much preoccupied" with Israel, and has "never given much thought" to Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. Concerning trade, Tu said that the two-way trade is "too low to estimate." Vietnam does not view that Syria is a state sponsor of terrorism, Tu claimed.

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COMMENT  
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20. (SBU) The key to understanding Vietnam's ongoing relations with the world's "bad guys" is what a senior MFA official called Vietnam's "sense of history." The common thread in bilateral relations with these countries is the political, moral, and sometimes material and financial support they gave to Vietnam during the war. Vietnam will continue to maintain good relations with these countries, while at the same time seeking to become more involved in the mainstream multilateral and regional environment. GVN senior leaders do not see a conflict in improving and enhancing relationships with the U.S., western Europe, and other countries while at the same time keeping up ties with and voicing support for "old friends."  
PORTER